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SUBJECT: UNITED RUSSIA WINS BIG DESPITE LETHARGIC TURNOUT

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[11](#). (SBU) Summary: Despite decreased voter turnout, United Russia unsurprisingly won all nine regional elections held March 1. Although framed by the Communists as a referendum on the regime's anti-crisis measures, KPRF made only modest gains in key regions where it had hoped to break United Russia's hold on power. Decreased turnout indicated less a protest against United Russia and its leaders than a deepening belief among Russians that they cannot influence the political process. United Russia won a majority everywhere except in Volgograd and Nenets Autonomous Region and, as in past elections, it performed best in regions with strong central governments (Tatarstan, Karachayevo-Cherkessia, and Kabardino-Balkaria). The Communists won seats in all regions but did not receive more than 28 percent (in Vladimir) in any one election; the ultra-nationalist LDPR and Just Russia passed the 7-percent threshold in seven regions; Patriots of Russia met the threshold in two regions. Allegations of electoral or campaign fraud have emerged particularly in Tatarstan. End Summary.

United Russia Wins Big, As Expected  
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[12](#). (SBU) On March 1, regional parliamentary elections were held in Tatarstan, Volgograd, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachayevo-Cherkessia, Khakassia, Arkhangelsk, Bryansk, Vladimir, and Nenets Autonomous Region (reftel). United Russia unsurprisingly won in all nine regions, although preliminary reports indicated the party did not receive a majority in Vladimir or Nenets Autonomous Region. As it did in October 2008 regional elections, United Russia performed best in regions with strong central governments (Tatarstan, Karachayevo-Cherkessia, and Kabardino-Balkaria) where get-out-the-vote efforts and local media restrictions more effectively hampered opposition efforts. United Russia also campaigned vigorously until the last possible moment, with Premier Putin publicly calling February 27 (at the legal cutoff for campaigning) for continued support of the government and its programs despite the economic situation.

[13](#). (SBU) All four State Duma parties were on the ballots in all nine regions, but only United Russia and the Communists met the 7-percent threshold in all nine. Despite hopes by party leaders to best United Russia in Bryansk or Vladimir, the Communists took only 23 percent and 28 percent in those regions, respectively. Just Russia and LDPR reached the threshold in seven regions each. Patriots of Russia, which was on three regional ballots, met the threshold in Karachayevo-Cherkessia and Khakassia.

Communists and LDPR Allege Fraud  
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[14](#). (SBU) The Communists and the ultra-nationalist LDPR have alleged electoral or campaign fraud in several regions, most notably in Tatarstan where LDPR leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy

demanding the resignation of the region's president and electoral commission. The Communists conducted "parallel counts" on March 1, which matched official results in some regions (such as Volgograd) but varied widely in others (such as Bryansk). The Communists have threatened to protest vigorously any electoral fraud, but Central Electoral Commission chair Vladimir Churov said March 1 that there were only 23 reports of irregularities. Electoral rights NGO Golos reported March 2 that it received a large number of reports of fraud in Tatarstan.

#### Lower Turnout Shows Economic Crisis Not Yet Political

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15. (SBU) Dmitriy Oreshkin, president of the Mercator Group, postulated to us March 2 that voter turnout was lower than previous regional elections because voters did not yet consider the economic crisis to be a political crisis. Election results were predictable, Oreshkin added, because elections are "no longer an instrument of cooperation between society and elites." Society knows that too, he noted, which led to a lower turnout on election day. A December 2008 Levada Center poll confirmed this hypothesis, as it revealed that only 8 percent of Russians agreed that they could influence the political process. Golos' Aleksandr Kynev speculated March 2 that turnout also was lower because, due to the economic crisis, the government was unable to adequately fund efforts to drum up the vote. Voters therefore were neither internally nor externally motivated to go to the polls. Without confidence that elections affect politics or that the economic crisis could be corrected through political change, the lower turnout was as

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unsurprising as United Russia's margin of victory.

#### Preliminary Results

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16. (SBU) Regional electoral commissions reported the following results on March 2:

-- Tatarstan (79 percent turnout, down slightly from 83 percent in 2004 elections): United Russia took an overwhelming 79 percent of the vote, up from 69 percent in 2004. The Communists took 11 percent (up from 6 percent in the last regional election), while Just Russia (5 percent) and LDPR (3 percent) failed to meet the threshold. LDPR and the Communists both have alleged repeated campaign fraud against the Tatarstan electoral commission.

-- Volgograd (42 percent turnout): United Russia fell just short of a majority with 49 percent of the vote. The Communists took 24 percent (down 2 percent from the last regional election), Just Russia received 13 percent, and LDPR won 10 percent. Patriots of Russia garnered just 1 percent. The Communists reported that their "parallel count" closely matched official results.

-- Karachayevo-Cherkessia (77 percent turnout): United Russia received 70 percent; the Communists 10 percent; and Patriots of Russia 11 percent. LDPR (3 percent) and Just Russia (5 percent) missed the threshold.

-- Kabardino-Balkaria (82 percent turnout): United Russia reportedly won an overwhelming majority with 72 percent; Just Russia received 12 percent; and the Communists (8 percent) and LDPR (7 percent) also cleared the threshold.

-- Khakassia (50 percent turnout): United Russia received 57 percent; the Communists 15 percent (up from 7 percent in the last regional election); LDPR 10 percent; Just Russia 7 percent; and Patriots of Russia 7 percent.

-- Bryansk (48 percent turnout, reportedly down from previous elections): United Russia won 54 percent, the Communists 24

percent (up 5 percent from the last regional election), LDPR 10 percent, and Just Russia 9 percent. The Communists reported that their "parallel count" varied widely from the official count, with United Russia taking 35 percent, KPRF 34 percent, LDPR 17 percent, and Just Russia 10 percent in their own tally. KPRF leader Gennadiy Zyuganov had said repeatedly that he believed the Communists would beat United Russia in the region.

-- Vladimir (34 percent turnout, below the expected 45 percent): United Russia reportedly won 51 percent of the vote, with the Communists receiving their best result of the day with 28 percent (up from 20 percent in the last regional election). Just Russia and LDPR each took 9 percent.

-- Nenets Autonomous Region (49 percent, which Kommersant reported was less than the last election): United Russia had its worst showing of the day with just 42 percent of the vote. The Communists took 21 percent; LDPR had its best result of the day with 20 percent, and Just Russia won 13 percent. The recent firing of the region's governor and other United Russia infighting had been expected to depress the party's turnout.

-- Arkhangelsk (38 percent turnout): United Russia won 52 percent of the vote. Just Russia picked up 18 percent, the Communists took 17 percent (up from 9 percent in the last election), and LDPR garnered 10 percent.

Comment  
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17. (SBU) Hamstrung by media access restrictions and an unmotivated electorate, the opposition proved unable to turn these regional elections into the anti-crisis referendum it had hoped for. So long as Russians overwhelmingly believe that they cannot influence the political process (according to the Levada poll), institutional inertia will thwart efforts to cast the economic crisis as a political problem whose course can be changed. As a result, with March 1 results evidence that economic despair does not lead directly to electoral comeuppance, the ruling regime will remain safe as the "legitimately elected" government for the foreseeable future.  
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